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"In Defence of Political Theory: Impact and Opportunities"

Thom Brooks

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Abstract

This essay will present the impact that political theory has made and the opportunities for future contributions. It will consider the contributions made by leading political theorists to policy debates, the lessons learned from their successes, and how political theorists might further pursue existing and new opportunities to develop impact. The discussion will close with consideration of several potential threats that theorists should become more aware of in order to best avoid them. The growing importance of impact in British higher education policy represents important challenges that may help promote the field of political theory. Political theorists should welcome these developments.

1. Introduction

A common misperception is that the so-called ‘impact agenda’ in British higher education is a major problem for colleagues working in the subfield of political theory. The concern is that political theory is by its nature abstract and often thought to be substantially impractical. Political theorists more readily apply themselves to the consideration of ideas, but not always their relation to practices. The problem is that it has become more common to require evidence of research impact in funding applications and research assessments of departments. Political theorists are disadvantaged by this development and the impact agenda may threaten its future.

This view rests on a deep misunderstanding about the relation between ideas and practices. Political theorists should welcome the impact agenda not least because the subfield should benefit from the impact that political theory may – and often does – possess. I offer a defence of political theory and its impact in this contribution. I will argue that the primary obstacle for political theorists is overcoming scepticism about the kind of impact theorists may offer. The issue is not about whether political theorists create impact, but rather the kinds of impact we should expect from political theorists.

2. A chequered past?

It is curious that any misperception about the impact of political theory has taken hold given the long history of impact-rich political engagement by theorists over the centuries. Examples abound. Several political theorists from antiquity had influence that many today might only dream of. Consider Aristotle and his pupil Alexander the Great with his later empire or Seneca and Imperial Rome with its powerful legacy. We owe much today to these figures from antiquity, but the influence of political theorists continues still in modern history, too. For example, John Locke’s (2004) *Second Treatise of Government* had a particularly profound impact on the founders of the United States, such as Thomas Jefferson, and a cornerstone for much natural rights jurisprudence. Or consider Immanuel Kant’s (1957) *Perpetual Peace* and its contributing to the establishing of the League of Nations, a precursor to the United Nations. My brief survey is not meant to claim that the only impact we should expect from political theorists must be at the level of Aristotle, Seneca, Locke or Kant.

Instead, my discussion aims only to confirm that many political theorists have demonstrated profound impact on how we are governed and perhaps the lenses through which we view ourselves socially and culturally. Therefore, the question is not whether political theorists create impact, but what kinds of impact we should expect.

Many political theorists have contributed to a chequered history that may have led to scepticism about *the value* of their impact. Again, there is little disagreement about *the fact* of impact: the issue is about the kinds of impact we find. For example, the great majority of canonical figures in political theory—including Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and many others—did not defend democracy as the most superior form of government (Brooks 2006a). While Aristotle taught a young Alexander the Great, Plato's students included the future tyrant Dionysius II of Syracuse. Plato's powerful arguments in support of a government ruled by philosopher-kings and not elected leaders is more often cited as evidence for the danger of his ideas rather than a case of promising future impact (see Brooks 2006b, 2008). Plato along with Hegel and Marx has also been (falsely) accused of providing philosophical justification for totalitarianism (Popper 1945, see Brooks 2012a).

Scepticism about the value of political theory's impact is perhaps exacerbated by other high profile cases. One important illustration is Niccolo Machiavelli (1995) and his brilliant treatise, *The Prince*. This work exhibits a wide range of political insight and critical perspective, but too often associated with the 'dark arts' of politics, a tome rendered both illuminating and almost dangerous at once (see Powell 2011). So we might accept his work produces impact that may have real practical usefulness, but some may still question whether its advice lies beyond the horizon of acceptable modern politics. To be clear, such critics misunderstand Machiavelli's work. Nonetheless, the point this raises is that it is perhaps not enough that political theorists demonstrate impact because they face an additional hurdle about the value of their impact. If their leading figures support objectionable (and perhaps odious) political institutions, then what useful practical instruction might contemporary political theorists still provide? Thus, perhaps we clarify existing norms that might guide combatant conduct in just wars (McMahan 2009) or provide a new understanding about punishment that illuminates a new approach to modern sentencing (Brooks 2012b), there will remain this question about its value for many in light of the popular scepticism arising from political theory's chequered past.

Political theory has a long and controversial record of genuinely substantial and significant contributions to politics and public policy of lasting merit. But what is the state of play today? I will now turn our attention to how many political theorists have been creating impact and the value this work has for politics and public policy.

3. Political thought: creating impact

Political theorists generate impact in three broad ways: our thinking about politics, our thinking about public policy more broadly, and through public engagement. I shall address each in turn. First, political theorists create impact on our thinking about politics. This impact is found across several levels. One level is the realm of political decision-making. Several significant political theorists of distinction have become Members of the House of Lords, including Onora O'Neill, Raymond Plant, and Bhikhu Parekh. Each has a voice in Parliamentary affairs where their political expertise may more directly impact government policies. Furthermore, each has contributed enormously to the intellectual tenor of Parliamentary debates—consider O'Neill's speeches on autonomy, consent and education as

well as Parekh's speeches on community, multiculturalism, and political justice—and beyond to issues of medical ethics, multiculturalism and religious toleration (Manson and O'Neill 2007, Parekh 2005, Parekh 2008, Plant 2001). Of course, other theorists provide significant contributions as well helping to clarify and reconfigure our understanding about autonomy and consent, the nature of democratic governance, the foundations of our multiple identities and issues pertaining to political authority, as well as religious toleration and reasonable difference amongst others (Brooks and Nussbaum 2013, Miller and Wertheimer 2009, Mendus 2009, Modood 2001, Nussbaum 2000, Rawls 1996, Weale 2007).

The second broad way in which political theory creates impact is related to the first and concerns our thinking about public policy more broadly (Smits 2009, Wolff 2011). Distinctive contributions include work on ethics and public health policy including issues concerning the challenges posed by great disparities in global health inequalities (Lenard and Straehle 2012). Climate scientists help us understand the evidence for climate change, but not the normative justification for choosing particular policy solutions. Political theorists have helped lead the way in creative practical work in how we should understand the challenges presented by climate change and what future policies are most preferable (Brooks 2012c, Giddens 2009, McKinnon 2012, Stern 2010). There is also significant work in the area of criminal justice and punishment where political theorists have made important contributions to the importance of restorative justice in reforming sentencing practices (Brooks 2012b, Mills 2003).

These first two ways in which political theorists create impact has real value for how we understand politics and may improve public policies. The tools of the political theorists' trade are rich conceptual analysis and analytical rigour that illuminate the grammar of our political understandings and draw greater attention to inconsistencies of both practice and principle. Political theorists perform more roles than help us understand politics and public policy, but they actively contribute to improving our knowledge about how institutions and policies work and how they might be improved. Thus, contemporary political theorists promise both impact and practical value that should overcome the popular scepticism owing far more to disagreement with the past than the present.

Finally, political theorists create impact through public engagement. Perhaps the most widely recognised illustration is the widely popular lectures on justice by Michael Sandel. His later *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* has exposed substantial research into the idea of political justice and what it means for most citizens to new audiences (Sandel 2010). Similarly, Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein's *Nudge* has caught the imaginations of the public and influential policy makers while rekindling interest in the potential promise of applying insights from behavioural economics to everything from government policy to everyday life (Thaler and Sunstein 2009).

These examples are perhaps few and high profile, but others are no less important. For example, there is a real and growing appetite for engagement with ethics and political ideas that should be welcome—and where political theorists have helped play an active role. Groups, such as the Café Philosophique and Sceptics Clubs, have sprung across many parts of the United Kingdom bringing together leading figures in political theory with a popular audience to critically address pressing issues of common concern. This year Newcastle upon Tyne will host its second annual Festival of Philosophy with academic talks open to the public over two weeks. Such activities are often overlooked in favour of other engagement activities, such as public policy think tanks and political party conferences, where political theorists also actively contribute, but not exclusively so. My purpose is to draw greater

attention to wider spheres of engagement where political theorists create impact beyond the so-called 'usual suspects' of seminar rooms and policymaker boardrooms.

4. The impact agenda

So it is clear that political theory has impact across several different areas highlighted above. A further issue is whether the impact that political theory demonstrates coheres with the 'impact agenda' now embedded within British higher education policy. The forthcoming Research Excellence Framework 2014 will include an assessment of research 'impact'. This impact is to be assessed through narrative case studies describing impact within the period 1 January 2008 through 31 July 2013. Each case study is limited to a maximum of 750 words must refer to at least one or two 'outputs' (including, but not limited, to academic publications) produced by the submitting department (or 'units of assessment'). Departments must produce roughly one impact case study for every 10 full-time academic staff (REF2013 (2011)). This timeframe may appear too brief, but it reflects the start of the current assessment period. Now that 'impact' is a part of research assessment for the foreseeable future it would be surprising if the timeframe was not extended much further in future. This might have been unfair to implement now because previous research assessments did not require evidence of research impact.

The crucial distinctions concern how impact is defined and applied. The REF2013 will consider impact of many geographical types (local, regional, national, international) and beneficiaries, such as the community, the environment, individuals and organisations (REF2013 2012: 68). Each is to have an equal status so impact on a local community is not necessarily inferior to impact on international organisations. Evidence must be provided in the form of citations in public consultation documents or journalists, citation by international bodies such as the UN or UNESCO, citation in policy documentation, public debate in the media, media reviews, measures of improved welfare or equality, and documented evidence of influence on guidelines, legislation, policy or standards (REF2013 2012: 72).

Impact is divided into several spheres. The first is impacts on creativity, culture and society. This includes the production of television programmes, shaping public or political debate, improved access to justice and equal opportunities, enhanced understanding of issues informing public attitudes or values, and influential contributions to campaigns for social, political and/or legal change. Examples from political theory are Michael Sandel's popular book and television programmes on justice and important work on social justice, such as Archon Fung's influential research on public policy and transparency and Martha Nussbaum's illuminating work on lesbian and gay rights (Fung, Graham, and Weil 2007; Nussbaum 2010; Sandel 2010).

The second sphere is economic, commercial and organisational impacts including improvements in business governance and corporate social responsibility policies such as Will Hutton's well-known contributions on stakeholding and economic justice (Hutton 1999, 2011). A third sphere is impacts on the environment which includes improved management or conservation of natural resources or environmental risk and improved design or implementation of environmental policy. Political theorists have made numerous contributions in this area, including critical examinations about carbon trading and the polluter pays principle (Gardiner 2011, Singer 2002).

One further sphere worth highlighting is impacts on public policy, law, and services. This includes changes to legislation or legislative practices, influence on regulation or access to justice, shaping or influencing policy made by government or private organisations, impact

on democratic participation and ‘enabling a challenge to conventional wisdom’ (REF2013 2012). This sphere of impact captures perhaps the more traditional understanding of impact – and in the wide sense of including challenges to received public understandings that might accommodate work focussed on either our knowledge about intellectual history (Skinner 1997) and contemporary policy debates (Sen 1999).

The impact agenda of British higher education policy is not a threat to the future of political theory in Britain. First, the policy’s understanding of impact across multiple spheres captures much, if not all, of the areas where political theory has had impact. Some spheres, such as impact on public policy or political debates, may be more readily achieved than others. But political theory has impact and the forms it might take are captured by the diverse ways in which impact will be assessed.

Secondly, impact is appropriate for all political theory. One possible concern is that the new importance of impact for research assessment will incentivize less ‘blue skies’ research and more short-term impact work. For example, blue skies research may often require more time to generate impact. John Rawls’s landmark *A Theory of Justice* was celebrated shortly after publication, but its lasting impact grew for many years afterwards leading to this work being understood today as one of the most important texts in political philosophy that continues to influence public policy debates (Rawls 1971). The timeframe for the REF2013 impact case studies is relatively brief, but again this is the case because there has not been a previous requirement for researchers to consider more centrally the potential impact of their work. Now that impact has become embedded in research assessment expectations we should expect the horizon to expand covering a larger timeframe in future. The impact agenda need not demand all research demonstrate immediate impacts because the timeframe will likely change.

A second potential worry is that the impact agenda will favour some forms of political theory and not others. Political theorists are sometimes divided between those engaged in the history of political ideas and others focused on contemporary debates. The concern is that impact will promote the latter at the expense of the former. So it is clear that the impact agenda may benefit contemporary political theory focused on current problems, such as climate change or just war. Historians of political thought might also clearly benefit from this agenda. Note that impact includes challenges to conventional wisdom, such as our common view about the influences on contemporary customs and practices, and also media presence. These are areas where intellectual historians may readily engage and create impact, too.

5. Bright future

This article rejects the idea that political theory has something to fear from the impact agenda. In fact, this is something that all political theorists would do well to embrace. Critical engagement with practice is what much political theory is about at its heart. The big challenge for political theorists is not whether they have impact, but to overcome the traditional popular scepticism about the value of the impact that political theorists might offer. Political theory is about much more than hypothetical thought experiments for people that have never existed. On the contrary, it is a rich subfield of our discipline not unlike others where impact is created for practical and popular benefit.

I warmly welcome the impact agenda as an opportunity to be embraced that may help improve the public standing of political theory and draw greater attention to the many contributions we offer.¹

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